INTERNET-COUNSELLING IN RUSSIA

Menovshchikov Victor Yuryevich,
Federation of Psychologists-Counselors Online

THEMATIC ASPECT: PSYCHOLOGY IN A WORLD OF CHANGE AND CRISIS. PROPOSALS FOR ACTION

helpletter@mail.ru

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Summary: A description of the state of the Internet-counselling and psychotherapy in Russia is given in this article. It covers practically all problem's aspects: the basic definitions are given, a summary on development of the Internet-counselling is presented, its main types, trends of the Internet-counselling research, organizational Internet-counselling models, goals and objectives of the professional community of Russia's Internet-counselling (the Federation of Psychologists-Counselors Online).

Keywords: distant psychological assistance, Internet-counselling, psychotherapy online, e-therapy, cybertherapy, types of Internet-consulting, studies of Internet-counselling, organizational models, professional community.

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In Russia, as well as abroad, various types of the distant psychological assistance via Internet are further developing called the Internet-counselling (they are also designated as psychotherapy online, e-therapy, cybertherapy and telehealth).

Marsha Ainsworth gives the following determination that Russian specialists are orientated to: “Counselling Online is the “e-therapy” – it is when a professional counselor or psychotherapist communicates with you via Internet emotionally supporting you and giving an advice with regards to your psychological health or rendering to you another professional service. It may be an answer to one question or a going on conversation; It can take place by e-mail, chat, video or even Internet –telephone line. E-therapy is a viable alternative source of assistance in the events when the traditional psychotherapy is inaccessible. This is effective. This is confidential. This is made by competent, qualified professionals who observe the ethic norms and rules. And for some people this is the only way through which they can receive help from a professional therapist (Ainsworth, 2007).

A history of development of the Internet-counselling in Russia is much shorter than the analogous history in West. One should point out in this case that the developing theory of the Internet-counselling is based on serious theoretical studies of the domestic psychology school of innovating thinking and computerization (Tikhomirov, 1972, 1986): Kornilova, Tikhomirov, 1990) and psychology of the Internet (Voiskunsky, 2010 and others).

The work of Russian psychotherapists – M.E. Burno (1987), V.L. Levi 1982) as well as our consulting correspondence via a regular post in 1993-2002 called by us a scribotherapy (from Latin scribo – to write and

Greek therapeia – treatment, health improvement) (Menovshchikov, 1995, 1998) may be also considered a forerunner of the Internet-counselling using a written text.

The first mentioning of the Internet-counselling in Russia may be found only in the Internet network. We know that separate attempts of the Internet-counselling have been already taken when using the amateur FIDO computer network that was popular in the USSR until the end of the 90es of the last century. In 1999 the World project on "Psychotherapy and counselling" by O.S. Martynova and B. Korobkov (Moscow, http://www.psyonline.ru) started forming and existing up till nowadays. A few psychologists-enthusiasts began creating their own sites, for example, Vit Tsenev (Novosibirsk, http://psyberia.ru), Boris Novoderzhkin practicing counselling online applying Skype-technologies (Moscow, http://www.bori.ru/) and others.

In 2006 I myself started consulting via the Internet joining a team of counselors of Profconsultant.ru portal. In 2007 I got in touch with the International Society for Mental Health (ISMHO) becoming its member.

In 2009 my colleagues and I created the Psychological consulting (online) group on Professionals.ru portal and on February 25, 2010 the Federation of Psychologists-Counselors Online was officially registered joining over 50 counselors from all over Russia. We will relate below in details about activities of the Moscow service of psychological assistance to population (MSPAP) where an internet-counselling service in a question-answer format appeared in 2006. In 2011 a full-fledged internet-counselling was started up in the Moscow service on many channels. This year the first conference already took place on the Internet-counselling and distant training in Moscow in the Moscow city psychological-pedagogical university (Aismontas, Menovshchikov, 2011), that has become annual. Within the frameworks of holding a conference new international contacts were established, namely with the TeleMentalHealth Institute (TMHI) (Marlene M. Maheu, USA and others).

Presently virtually all famous types of the *Internet*-counselling are used in Russia: video-conference communication; audio sessions; "one-on-

one" text chat; "one-on-one" electronic mail; group therapy using a message board; group therapy using electronic mail; group therapy using chat; support group online; therapeutic attendance in virtual communities; self-perfection tools (self-aid) online; webblogs; assessment (psycho-diagnostics) online; information websites; personal websites, network magazines; audio, sound records and films, etc. In our opinion, an activity of group forms are the most extended in open non-structural formats (forums), an answer to a client's sole question via the Internet or an individual counselling via SKYPE, chat or mail.

From the very beginning of promotion of the counselling online a discussion regarding the usefulness and applicability has been continuing, however foreign researches of recent years (Azy Barak, Liat Hen, Meyran Boniel-Nissim, Na'ama Shapira, 2008) confirmed the efficiency of the most various types of the Internet-counselling and psychotherapy. In Russia research of the Internet-counselling and psychotherapy are not numerous (Bilyk, 2012; Vinogradov, 2010; Drozdov, 2011; Popova, 2012; Postnikov, Salomakhina, 2011; Sinelnikova, 2011; Strugovshchikova, 2010; Yagnyuk and *others*, 2012). Simultaneously the Federation of Psychologists-Counselors Online is consistently working out a research program and there has been already formed certain theoretical generalizations (Menovshchikov, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Monographs and Practical Guide to Internet-Based Counselling were issued by us as well (Menovshchikov, 2010, 2011).

And in this case an accent of the professional interest has been already shifted from a question on the general efficiency of the counselling online towards a question about its most efficient methods, tendencies of psychotherapy and organizational models. If one may say about theoretical tendencies of psychologists' work online, then we came across with and used ourselves the very different theories of psychotherapy: starting from a client-centered approach (for instance, A.B. Orlov) to a psychoanalysis (for instance, N.L. Vasilyeva, N.N. Naritsyn). We are familiar with the Russian specialists successfully

applying in Internet the Gestalt-therapy and symboldrama (for instance V.V. Ilyin, www.psy-nature.ru) and others.

Currently in Russia one may single out three *Organizational Models* of the Internet-counselling: 1) State (for instance, Msph.ru); 2) Non-commercial (for instance, Pobedish.ru); 3) Commercial models (for instance, Liveexpert.ru).

To our mind, a *Commercial model* of the Internet-counselling has so far obtained the most prevalence in Russia. Virtually each site offering pay psychological services has an opportunity to put a question to a psychologist on the forum free of charge.

Such kind of services bear a marketing character and directed, first of all, towards attraction of clients for getting by them the consequent paid services – services rendered by a full-time counselling and psychotherapy, training services, etc. And what is more rare – an attraction in getting counselling via Skype or electronic mail.

There also appeared occult-magic projects among commercial ones offering the help of extrasensory individuals, parapsychologists, astrologists, etc.

Non-commercial models are being developed by separate groups of enthusiasts. They do not assume any payment. Partly they are orientated towards the most serious problems, such as suicide or feeling of grief, etc. They are less widened and less publicized by the mass-media.

Finally, *State models*, in our opinion, are so far less numerous. Let's take as an example the Moscow service of psychological support to population and the MES psychological service. Although a format of answers to a client's sole question has been existed for already many years it remained not only a sole possibility of communication with psychologists via the Internet but the only form of address to a psychologist as well. Counselors of this service did not possess of either special training on the Internet-counselling, or a scientific-methodological support. In the MES the Internet-counselling services included only a chat and were fulfilled by the personnel being temporarily free of their telephone counselling duties.

As soon as in July 2011 a sector of the Internet-counselling was set up in the Moscow service on psychological support to population enabling (jointly with the Federation of Psychologists-Counselors Online) provide in future a scientific and methodological support of newly formed services of psychological aid at the distance (first of all using the Internet – counselling).

Every resident of Moscow may dial from a city telephone simple number 051 and work out with a psychologist his own problems – whether a serious crisis situation or questions concerning a personality development, family situation or professional problems (there are analogous telephone services in other cities of Russia as well). Only qualified personnel is engaged in such telephone services who graduated from psychological institutes having an experience of counselling. An important peculiarity of TPA is its 24 hour accessibility - a person called there has a chance to communicate with a psychologist at any time of day and night.

The “Internet-counselling sector” is a structural subdivision of the “Crisis Hotline” 051 (CH) and designated for rendering a psychological assistance via the Internet to various categories and groups of population found oneself in a hard vital situation.

The main Objective of this Sector is to render a psychological aid to population of Moscow using modern distant technologies (Internet) in solution of personality, family problems, matters of psychological health and problems of a professional self-determination as well as promotion of one’s personal and professional growth, self-realization and upgrading one’s qualitative level of life. An experience of work showed that the persons applied to the center are not only residents of Moscow but they are from other regions and towns not having a wide network for a psychological support as well as those who temporarily or constantly live abroad where they are unable to receive a support from a Russian-speaking psychologist or psychotherapist.

The work of the Sector’s personnel is formed in accordance with the Principles set out in the “Conceptual foundations of the sector’s activity in the Internet-counselling”.

The procedure of service is build up in compliance with two basic models:

1. Model №1 – using video conference.

An Internet-counselor using a video conference (with a web camera) works to schedule (in the morning, day and evening time).

A client intending to apply for a psychological support using a video conference (SKYPE program) should preliminary sign up for a virtual appointment at a fixed time by
E-mail of the Sector’s Internet-counselling.

In separate cases he should preliminary fill in a “Client’s Questionnaire” with indication of his passport data, residential address, telephone number and technical opportunities for an Internet-contact (including login in SKYPE). The questionnaire is forwarded to a client by e-mail. However in a majority of cases clients prefer to keep anonymity.

The total duration of a virtual communication as a rule comes to 45-60 minutes.

Decision on a repeated virtual communication is made by a consultant jointly with a client.

2. Model № 2 – anonymous apply via chat (electronic mail).

An Internet-counselor working via chat (electronic mail) should be available at any time of the day and night for everyone who wishes to apply for help irrespectively of one’s age, male, religious views and nationality (in practice, the service is functioning within a limited day and night time).

All clients have a right to be “heard” (accepted) and a right for respect irrespectively of their religious beliefs, views or personality choice.

Details of all calls especially those concerning private life of persons who appealed for help remain confidential.

Using this model of assistance both clients and counselors have a right to remain anonymous (use a pseudonym, “nick”, conventional avatar).

Using any model of rendering assistance the Sector employs the specialists having a diploma on higher education and majoring in the area of the applied psychology and psychotherapy passed a specialized training in a sphere of rendering a psychological support via Internet and by phone.

A counselor’s rights and obligations are determined by a job description and provision on the “Sector of the Internet-counselling”.

The premises of the Internet sector of the Moscow service of psychological support to population are equipped with high speed access computers to the Internet, web-cameras and the installed software for communication with clients (SKYPE, Mail.ru Agent etc.). And for setting up of an alternative emergence communication channel – a multi-channel telephone line (enabling a client to call number 051).

Licensed security equipment (anti-virus programs) is installed on computers.

The following documents are prepared for arrangement of the Sector’s work:

1. The conceptual foundation of the Sector’s consulting activity. The document includes a description of the sector’s objectives, models of assistance, general and special principles of the Internet-counselling, procedure of servicing to population, the sector’s organizational support, interrelations with other structures, maintenance support of the sector’s activities and arrangement of advertising.

2. Provision on the Internet-counselling sector. It includes the general part (procedure on setting up of the sector, subordination, servicing), goals and functions; procedure of servicing; mode of operation; selection and primary training of counselors; advanced training, interrelations with other structures; the sector’s logistical support and information activity.

3. A specialist’s description job (counselor’s standard instruction is adapted).

4. A possibility of using counselors’ telephone and full-time reporting documentation in the course of Internet-counselors’ work has been verified. Offers on the required adjustment are proposed. Client’s questionnaires have been prepared for an experimental check up of the efficiency of the Internet-counselling.

A special page is set up on MSPAP site, the texts on advertising and information materials on the site are prepared. A creeping line is launched on MSPAO site about the opening of servicing by SKYPE-counselling. The using of such an advertisement proved to be efficient. Clients started instantly applying for services on the Internet-counselling after appearance of a “scrawling text”.

As of October 3, 2011 upon placement of advertisement on holding of the Internet-counselling on the MSPAP site an active work with clients began.

In 2012 addresses via electronic mail prevailed (75.6%). Addresses using SKYPE and video-conferences (14.5%) took a second place. Counselling via chat using either SKYPE programs or Mail.ru Agent (7.3%) took a third place. Addresses using only an audio channel and via SKYPE took the last place (2.7%). In other words, compared with 2011, a share of counselling using video conferences via SKYPE in 2012 was considerably increased – 3.12% versus 14.5%. A share of addresses via electronic mail was reduced – 75.6% versus 90% in 2011. In addition, chat counselling left behind a number of counseling using an audio channel. A share of audio counselling was correspondingly reduced from 5% to 2.7%. In whole, in our opinion, it demonstrated a growth of popularity of video conferences, a raised confidence among population to this kind of psychological support and its being known. 35.2% contacts reached up to 5 minutes on duration. Information enquiries and procedure of “client-counselor” interrelations were discussed.

Counselling of duration from 15 minutes to 1 hour came to 54.1 %. In 5.7% a counselling lasted more than 1 hour. In 5% cases a contact lasted

not less than 1 minute for the account of standardization by counselors of a form of the primary answer to client's enquiry when a client is only offered to decide on a counselling format. Among those who applied for help 17% are men, 83% - women. The main share among the applied became persons of young and middle age (21.4%). In 37.1% cases the age was not determined.

The addresses associated with health (39%), love affairs (25%) were most frequent, according to a problem code. Problems regarding self-acceptance were less presented (10%), family and marital relations - (7%). Problems associated with dependencies were expressed a little bit less - (5%), interrelations between children and parents - (5%), educational and professional problems - (5%). Addresses on sexual relations came to 2%. The subject of violence had the least percentage (1%).

In 2010 a professional society of specialists engaged in this sphere – the *Federation of Psychologists-Counselors Online* - was found in Russia to promote professional models of the Internet – counselling.

The basic objectives of the Federation are a promotion to its members: in development of theory and practice of a professional psychological counselling (psycho-correction, psychotherapy) online; in support of scientific research and standards in the area of a psychological counselling (psycho-correction, psychotherapy) online.

For realization of the goals the Federation fulfills the following directions of its activity:

- spread of information, determination of criteria of psychologists-counselors' practical activities online and management of their observance;

- representation in state establishments and public relations for the purpose of promotion of scientific and creative works on psychological counselling online at domestic and international conferences, symposiums, seminars and congresses;

- establishment of contacts and collaboration with the state and non-state Russian and international organizations, societies of a

psychological counselling online and other counselling - psychotherapeutic directions;

- scientific research and workings out in the field of a psychological counselling (psycho-correction, psychotherapy) online, including studies of public opinion, relations of users and providers of the Internet servicing;

- development, approval and realization of standards on professional training, retraining and supervision in the field of a psychological counselling (psycho-correction, psychotherapy) online;

- edition of books, brochures, booklets, magazines and analogous publications in the field of psychological counselling (psycho-correction, psychotherapy) and their distribution. In particular, the Federation makes an issue of “Psychological consulting Online” magazine. Scientific materials familiarizing with foreign and domestic elaborations in the field of a psychological counselling at the distance, results of experimental studies and practical recommendations are represented on pages of the magazine.

The Federation of Psychologists-Counselors Online renders counselling services as well for the purpose of an experimental verification of the efficiency of various forms of psychological counselling and psychotherapy in the Internet.

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